

# Legal Aid volunteers honored

By Kristin M. Kraemer, Herald staff writer

Barb Otte thought the Tri-Cities was doing great in early 2009 when she heard how the financial meltdown was affecting other volunteer lawyer programs throughout Washington.

While other organizations were seeing an increase in pro bono cases for middle class people, a majority of the Benton-Franklin Legal Aid Society's clientele remained those at the poverty level.

That is until August, when Legal Aid's executive director started seeing more people seeking free legal help for landlord/tenant disputes over evictions and bankruptcy filings.

"I think that's just because the economy (crisis) hit harder, later in the Tri-Cities," Otte said. "Now I've actually seen the middle class start to get hit."

The Legal Aid Society has handled 131 cases this year requiring full representation and taken about 4,500 clients through phone calls, walk-ins and referrals. The 49 attorneys who volunteered their services will be recognized today at the organization's annual luncheon.

About 80 percent of the cases are family law, dealing with divorce, child custody, paternity, parentage or child support. The remainder of cases are for issues like wills, immigration and guardianships.

Otte said people have come in needing advice on foreclosures and bankruptcies because they've lost their job and can no longer pay the bills.

Her office offers a family law class once a month, and in 2010 hopes to hold a bankruptcy clinic and to have a lawyer in place to help people with paperwork during the court's domestic docket days.

The Legal Aid Society screens applicants, who must have an income that falls under national poverty guidelines. They can only get an attorney through Legal Aid if the other side already is represented.

In May, Otte had been anticipating a 50 percent cut in funding and was concerned her office wouldn't be able to take on so many cases. But she recently learned that she will have \$56,000 to operate on in 2010, the same as the past year.

The Legal Foundation of Washington distributes the money to pro bono programs, including Legal Aid or volunteer lawyer programs, Columbia Legal Services and the Northwest Justice Project. They have three primary sources: IOLTA funds or interest on lawyers' trust accounts, state appropriations and statewide donations from lawyers and other legal professionals.

The biggest contributor to the operating money is from the interest money that lawyers hold in trust for their clients. However, with the poor economy and interest rates on those accounts dropping to zero percent, not much is coming in to help provide civil and legal aid services for low-income and vulnerable Washingtonians, Otte said.

Though Otte is happy she didn't see her numbers drop further, she remains cautious about the future and would like to see more money in the reserve account.

The Benton-Franklin organization operates on \$70,000 a year. That covers wages, health benefits, holidays and vacations for two staff members, in addition to building rent, annual audit fees and basic services like internet, phone and copy machine.

"We really operate on a shoestring budget. We take any donation, even on things like paper clips," Otte said.

Board members also plan two big fundraisers a year.

Otte said she'd like to see more charitable support from attorneys and judges so the Benton-Franklin Legal Aid Society doesn't have to depend upon unpredictable funding every year.

An effort known as the Campaign for Equal Justice encourages people to submit their donations to the statewide group, which then distributes the money through the Legal Foundation of Washington based on each county's charitable participation. There are 22 Legal Aid offices that receive a share.

"Donating to them instead of to me is guaranteeing I get more of the money I want" in each year's budget, said Otte. She worries if more donations aren't made from Benton-Franklin, her share could drop in the future.

Otte said only \$945 has been submitted from the Tri-Cities this year compared to \$1,467 last year. She pointed out that King County, with \$612,711 donations in 2008, kicks out most of the money for the state.